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An Introduction to the Social Construction of Eating Disorders among Women

It is very common now to talk about the epidemic of eating disorders among women in Western societies (1). Whatever the actual increase in these, there are more reports of anorexia and bulimia sufferers, and of eating disorders generally in recent years.

Though there are male sufferers, usually gay men, the vast majority of sufferers are female. Thus it is necessary to try and explain this gender inequality. Many researchers and writers concentrate on social-based explanations, and that is the focus of this article.

The first problem is to actually measure the prevalence of eating disorders. The simplest way is to record the number of referrals to specialist clinics or psychiatric hospitals. These figures suggest a prevalence rate of 2-3% of teenage females.

However self reported questionnaires on eating and dieting behaviour generally find a wider prevalence of problems. For example, Cooper and Fairburn (1983) gave out 369 questionnaires at a British Family Planning Clinic. 20.6% of the respondents admitted to "eating problems", and 26.4% to having "binge eaten ever" (7.4% "more than weekly"). 85% of the respondents had weight within the "normal range", but 60% reported "feeling fat".

The authors concluded that "one-fifth of this general population sample of adult women reported that they had an eating problem".

While in a survey of year 11 pupils in Britain, 58% of the girls wanted "to lose some weight", and only 36% reported being "happy as am" (quoted in Donnellan 1996). In an Australian study of 19-29 year old women, 47% wanted to weigh "a little lighter", and 32% "a lot lighter" (quoted in Abrahams and Llewellyn-Jones 1992).

So it is possible to see that eating disorders are more widely a problem for women than just those receiving specialist help. It is a continuum rather than two distinct groups of eating disorders vs healthy eating behaviour.

Seid (1994) sees anorexia nervosa as the "paradigm of our age". "We have elevated the pursuit of lean, fat-free body into a new religion. It has a creed: 'I eat right, watch my weight, and exercise'".

Wolf (1990) points out that the poorest women in Asia eat 1400 calories per day, while Western women on certain diets eat only 800. Historically this amount of calories per day is viewed

as semi-starvation.

In terms of its effectiveness, 90-98% of traditional weight loss treatments fail, as the weight is regained within 2-5 years (quoted in Burgard and Lyons 1994).

FEMINIST EXPLANATIONS

Feminist writers have tended to look to society, and, in particular, gender relations, as the cause of eating disorders, rather than any internal biological explanations within women. There are a number of different feminist explanations, of which a selection are summarised here.

Control and Rebellion

"A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty, but an obsession about female obedience" (Wolf 1990).

Susie Orbach (1993) sees the female body as a battleground for autonomy, and eating disorders can be viewed as rebellion against the pressures to conform. Writing within a feminist psychoanalytic tradition, Orbach argues that unconscious meanings are attached to food for women in Western societies:

These meanings included feelings of guilt, the practice of comfort-eating and self-denial of nutritional needs, and their manifestations as eating disorders became expressions of women's exploitation in a patriarchal culture (Hepworth 1999 p61).

The dominant ideology equates sexual attraction with slimness. For Orbach, "all women live with a tension about their place in the 'World'". In other words, there is a conflict or confusion in the socialisation of women, and constant dilemmas about their identity.

Lawrence (1984) notes that:

"normal" slimming may be due, at least in part, to patriarchal conformity; but anorexia, while encompassing aspects of conformity in its own paradoxical way, is essentially a (self-defeating) striving for autonomy, self-esteem, and transcendence of the denigrated female body (p71).

The experience of women, ie traditional socialisation, puts the emphasis on the family, and women's own desires are put second. Her self identity is as part of the family, and associated with a male. But with changes in society, particularly away from the nuclear family, this produces conflicting messages. Thus starvation can be seen as an attempt at control in a world lacking control (Lewis and Blair 1994).

Alternatively, Boskind-Lodahl (1976) develops the idea that sufferers accept the feminine stereotypes, and have an "exaggerated striving to achieve it" rather than rejecting it.

"They have devoted their lives to others to validate their sense of worth.. None has developed a basic sense of personal power or of self worth" (Boskind-Lodahl 1976 p438).

In contradiction, Bordo (1993) argues that the revulsion towards hips, stomach and breasts in anorexia nervosa is an expression of rebellion against maternal, domestic femininity.

Images of Women

Petkova (1997) argues that the problem lies in the social construction of femininity in a patriarchal society (2). Men exert pressure on women to be thin. The argument goes that:

dominant images (discourses) do not come out of thin air, but are the product of power relations.. such discourses come to exercise power over women. They do more than just "reflect" women back to themselves, telling them who they are, they also "discipline" women (Petkova 1997 p5).

Part of the "disciplining" Wolf (1990) points out is that women are forced to achieve the "Professional Beauty Qualification" (PBQ) (3). But women are not like that, because the representations of female beauty are unrealistic and unobtainable. For example, it has been suggested that if any woman had the figure of a "Barbie" doll, she would fall forward with the weight of her breasts relative to the rest of her body, or her legs collapse because they are too thin to hold the body weight. The current unrealistic ideal body shapes are found in computer games and images (eg Laura Croft from the "Tomb Raider" games).

Struggling to be thin suits men nicely as the female shape demands do not impinge on male power. Coward (1984) calls this the "socialisation of denial".

It is not only that women are presented in certain images, but that they are actually represented as food. Rushmer's (1991) analysis of women's magazine adverts showed that the distinction between the food and the woman's body is not made; eg adverts for chocolate bars have women clothed in the wrapping of the product. The "collapse of women's bodies into the product forms" (Hepworth 1999).

Steiner-Adair (1994) takes a different stance:

Since the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s, thinness has replaced virginity in its representation of goodness in women. Obesity is regarded with the scorn previously reserved for sexuality. Heads no longer turn in moral righteousness when a scantily dressed woman walks down the street, and we hear the same language of moral condemnation applied to obese women that used to be directed toward the sexually active woman (p386).

Role of the Media

"The current emphasis on excessive thinness for women is one of the clearest examples of advertising's power to influence cultural standards, and consequent individual behaviour" (Kilbourne 1994 p395).

Wiseman has noted the increase in diet and exercise articles in women's magazines between 1959 and 1989 (Wiseman et al 1992), and the same in television adverts between 1973 and 1991 (Wiseman et al 1993).

Bruch (1974) shows how artists throughout history have portrayed women in different ways. For example, large breasts, heavy hips and thighs were prominent in pre-19th century art.

Many writers highlight the English model, Twiggy (5 foot 7 inches, 98 pounds) as the beginning of the thinness ideal in the 1960s. "Female beauty had come to be represented by a gawky bare-boned adolescent" (Seid 1994).

Spitzer et al (1999) compared the mean weight and Body Mass Index (BMI) (4) of models over the second half of the last century. For example, the mean weight for "Miss America" in the 1950s was 56.06 kg and a BMI of 19.35, compared to 50.76 kg and 18.06 respectively in the 1980s. A BMI of 18 is viewed as malnourished.

The ideal female weight, represented by actresses, models, and Miss America, has progressively decreased to that of the

thinnest 5-10% of American women. Consequently, 90-95% of American women feel that they don't 'measure up'. Societies have never been kind to deviants, but in America a statistical deviation has been normalised, leading to millions of women to believe that they are abnormal (Seid 1994 p8).

Modern images of thinness are reinforced by the "slimming industry" or "health industry" (5).

Wooley (1994) points out that it is the presence of more of these images in the media, and in particular, images of naked female bodies. He argues that "pornography rather than fashion controls the meanings.. of the images of women's bodies".

Wolf (1990) records that pornographic films outnumber other films by at least three to one in America. But because pornography focuses on specific body parts, like the breasts and buttocks, women's magazines attempt to respond with "images free of pornography's taint.. they offered thin, then 'toned' masculinized images of women's bodies" (Wooley 1994 p43).

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST EXPLANATIONS

For social constructionists, discourses (6) come to dominant, and these set the agenda for "taken-for-granted" reality. In particular, Hepworth (1999) looks at the discourses that conceptualise anorexia nervosa as psychopathology.

Discourses involve practices that position the subjects of the diagnosis anorexia nervosa in particular ways and in turn reproduce dominant ideas about the phenomenon. In the case of anorexia nervosa particular discourses coalesced during the late 19th century to produce a set of statements and practices that later established medicine, psychiatry and psychology as having the capacity both to explain the loss of appetite in women and to intervene in specific ways to change their behaviour (p3).

What this means in practice is that it is only recently that anorexia nervosa has been seen as an illness. In the 12th and 13th centuries, women who starved themselves were viewed as "saint-like" because of their fasting.

Hepworth (1997) also highlights that modern discourses:

isolate the body from the different meanings of food and eating that was once common in pre-modern times. Talk about

the flavours and pleasures of food and eating scarcely exists, or largely constructed through discourses of health and disease.. Diet has become a dominant discourse about food, particularly through its relationship with health gains, and the practice of dieting to achieve a socially desirable thin body. The discourse of diet constructs food choice and experiences of eating through these dominant messages (p108).

Internalisation of the External

It is important to emphasise that for social constructionists, the self is a product of social change, structures and institutions in society. Thus if society is undergoing changes, so will the self of that society's inhabitants.

A number of writers talk about "post-modernity" as summarising the recent changes in Western societies. The characteristics of "post-modernity" vary between writers, but they include a loss of faith in traditional institutions (like progress through science), a greater complexity of society, increasing technologies for communication and travel, the multiplicity of possibilities, and the rise of relativism (Stevens and Wetherell 1996) (7).

A key characteristic is fragmentation, and, I would argue, contradictory messages. These contradictory messages can be seen as manifest in the self as eating disorders, particularly bulimia with its binge-purge or binge-starve cycles. The social messages are most contradictory for women, who must now be the "perfect mother" and the "perfect worker"; able to care for others, yet be independent to concentrate on her needs. To indulge herself but at the same time to have the "perfect figure". Not only are the messages contradictory, but they are unobtainable (eg "perfect figure").

Malkin et al (1999) reported a content analysis of the cover page of 21 women's and men's magazines. 78% of the women's magazines (and none of the men's) had messages about bodily appearance. 25% of the women's cover pages had conflicting messages compared to none of the men's (significant difference at 0.0005 for X²). The common messages for women's magazines were diet, exercise, and cosmetic surgery.

Ferguson (1983) compared three British magazines over 30 years after World War II: "Woman", "Woman's Own", and "Woman's Weekly". The later magazines clearly present contradictory messages of women represented as caring and nurturant of others

(ie family), yet free to nurture and develop their own needs and wishes. Generally images in magazines present women in polarised ways eg virginal, innocent and pure, vs sexually experienced and seductive (Morant 1997).

The discourse of dieting mentioned earlier also exists hand in hand with the loss of self control and enticement:

Cakes, ice cream and chocolate have become contemporary icons of media campaigns for 'luxury foods' and described as being "irresistible", "indulgent", and "naughty". These foods are presented as enticing the consumer, and with which the consumer can entice others, such as the practice of men buying chocolates for women (Hepworth 1999 p110).

But women must both resist and succumb simultaneously.

FOOTNOTES

1. Thompson (1994) prefers to use "eating problems" rather than "disorder". "Disorder" "categories the problems as individual pathologies, which deflects attention away from the social inequalities underlying them".

2. "Patriarchy.. means the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does not imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence, and resources" (Lerner 1986 quoted in Wooley 1994).

3. "Wolf (1991) has also emphasised that what is important about women's beauty norms is that they affect behaviour as much as appearance. Thus, women with bound feet cannot walk, and women with mutilated genitals cannot express their sexuality" (Rothblum 1994 p59).

4. BMI = weight in kg divided by height in metres . The normal range of BMI is seen as 20 to 24.9.

5. It is estimated that the slimming/health industry makes 50 billion dollars per annum worldwide (quoted in Kilbourne 1994).

6. "Discourses" are not easy to define. Parker (1992) sees them

as a "system of statements which construct an object". Potter and Wetherell (1987) call them "historically developing linguistic practices". Malson (1998) says discourses are social practices. Generally, though, "discourses" can be seen as spoken interactions, written texts, and ideas.

7. "'Post-modern' refers to a time-period when the honeymoon with 'modernity' - science, technological progress, and social freedoms - is over. The post-modern self describes the selfhood that many people seem to be experiencing now, at least in the West: a mixture of disillusionment, boredom, confusion and celebration" (Thomas 1996 p327).

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Kevin Brewer

Article written October 2000

Human Cognition and Cognitive Science: A Review of the Limitations of Modelling Human Cognition using Computer Technology - Introduction

PROLOGUE

This title is rather broad, but serves to bring together a series of short articles which I propose to write for future issues of this journal. The aim of these articles is to summarize research that I have carried out, and issues that I have discussed and debated with psychologists and other system developers since 1998. Many of the ideas that have come out of these discussions do not have a home elsewhere - mainly because they are wide of the field of study that I am directly concerned with - that of knowledge storage for use in Artificial Intelligence systems (more specifically, for so called "computer agents").

However, I feel that the content of these discussions has been very interesting and should be documented. As a point of note for the reader who does not have extensive knowledge about computer technologies, I do not intend to use many computer terms in these articles. However, where these are necessary, the terms used will be explained. My aim is to make these discussions available to a wider audience so that hopefully, further discussion and debate may continue.

INTRODUCTION

The study of cognition concerns the mind - or mental processes. In particular, it is concerned with "all the ways in which we come to know the world around us, particularly memory, perception, language, thinking, problem-solving, reasoning and concept-attainment. The cognitive psychologist compares the Mind to a computer in an attempt to gain understanding of the former which might be impossible without the latter" (Gross 1987).

Cognitive psychology argues that if humans operate in the same way as computers when carrying out a particular function (such as perception for example), because we know how the computer works, we can extrapolate backwards to explain how the human mental process is carrying out that function. Of course, this varies according to the function being investigated. Perception is perhaps not a good example here. Much has been learned from human biology to support the development of robotic sensors - so that in this case - the examination of human physiology has provided the understanding needed to enable the

development of perceptory systems for computers!

However, supporters of cognitive psychology insist that there are processing parallels between the human brain and the computer, and that we can learn about ourselves by building models of cognition in the computer and performing psychological tests on these models.

This is really the starting point for the discussions that will follow. How valid and how useful are the computer models that are being built to mimic human cognition? Although, on the face of it, this question may seem to have a straightforward "black and white" answer, the situation is not quite as simple. This is because there are a number of different languages that attempt to model aspects of human cognition quite specifically. Some of these models are highly capable at performing particular tasks and within defined boundaries may be viewed as skilled models of cognition.

For example, the ACT-R language (Adaptive Control of Thought) is a cognitive architecture that contains separate problem-solving memory and declarative memory components (declarative knowledge is information about the world, facts, objects and their inter-relationships). It aims to provide an integrated account of many aspects of human cognition. It has a number of learning mechanisms that are very flexible. These learning mechanisms and its memory retrieval ability are acknowledged to be good and for some researchers have helped to shape modern thinking of how human cognition may operate in these areas (Pew and Mavor 1998).

Similarly SOAR (which stands for "State, Operator And Result") is a computer language and cognitive architecture, although it contains a more general theory of cognition with it. SOAR was designed by psychologists and computer scientists to visualize their "Unified Model of Cognition". Thus SOAR grew out of a number of key psychological hypotheses of general cognition. Some of these hypotheses are questionable now, two decades after it was first produced. SOAR is nevertheless quite a powerful tool, and can be programmed to perform intricate tasks, such as modelling the flying of an aircraft by its pilot.

Despite these computer architectures and others like them, there is still no single, all-purpose architecture that can model human cognition to produce realistic human behaviours in response to such diverse external (non cognitive) stimuli as hunger, stress, fear, and peer-pressure. Although this expectation may be too much to ask of any computer program at this time, some of the problems that need to be addressed in order to improve current

systems are worth examining in detail. Therefore, the key discussion areas that I will address in subsequent articles are listed below, together with a brief introduction to each of them:

- **Common Sense Knowledge:** What is Common Sense Knowledge? How can it be used and what are the problems of trying to define it for computer based human cognitive models? What we take for granted as obvious is not at all obvious to the computer. It transpires that even defining very simple common sense behaviours in the computer is a complex process.
- **The Problem of Representing Intuition:** Research on human cognition has recently indicated that the role of intuition may have much greater significance than previously realised. In a subsequent article, intuition is discussed, and the problems of relating this to the cognitive model in the computer.
- **Physiological Effects - Fear, Hunger, Stress, Noise etc:** We all know that environmental factors such as lack of food, cold, sleep deprivation affect the way in which we perform. Research has been done on quantifying some of the behaviour moderation accounted for by these factors. Some cognitive scientists have used mathematical techniques to limit the effectiveness of computer models under "stress", but this is a crude and general approach to solving a deeper problem.
- **Sociological and Cultural Effects:** Social discourses - such as group expectation, bravery, and social acceptability affect the way in which we live our lives, think and relate to others. If social and cultural effects like these are not modelled in cognitive systems, accurate group interactions and group behaviours cannot be derived from computer models.
- **Intelligence:** Research on intelligence has had a history of misinterpretation, misunderstanding and bigotry. Intelligence is a difficult topic because of the many theories of what defines intelligence. Modern ideas of what constitutes intelligence are much more encompassing of abilities including manual dexterity, musicality and language manipulation, as well as incorporating more traditional "intelligence related skills" such as academic ability.
- **Motivation, Leadership and the "Self-Actualizing" Computer:** What motivates people? What makes them good leaders? What are people's self actualizing goals? In this realm, personality

affects performance. But computer programs do not have personality. How can computer based cognitive models have individuality?

- **Rationality:** In the AI community there is the notion of a "rational agent" - an autonomous computer program that has goals which it sets out to achieve as best as it can. But how rational are humans? Our rationality is not consistent - for example - people still drink too much even if they know it will make them ill and that they shouldn't for health reasons. In effect we choose to be rational when it suits us. The cognitive scientists have not considered this dilemma in their rational models for computer generated behaviours.
- **Spirituality, Morality:** Very difficult to quantify - yet the effect of morality and spiritual beliefs on people's thinking and actions is immense. Cognitive computer models almost entirely ignore this area - possibly because many of the computer architectures and tools currently used in AI research are of Western origin pandering to a mind-set biased towards the material rather than the spiritual.

SUMMARY

This report is an introduction to a series of short articles to follow in subsequent journals. In the next edition, I will review the problems of representing "Common Sense Knowledge" in computer architectures.

For readers keen to examine in more detail the kinds of "cognitive" computer architectures currently available, a good place to start would be by examining SOAR. This is freely available for download from the University of Michigan (<http://bigfoot.eecs.unich.edu/-soar/main.html>).

A well-documented SOAR tutorial may be found at the University of Nottingham Psychology Department website (<http://www.psychology.nottingham.ac.uk/staff/Frank.Ritter/pst/ps-t-tutorial.html>).

For non-programmers, plenty of background information on SOAR is also available from the SOAR home page at Michigan (as above). Alternatively, a collection of papers on all aspects of SOAR - from founding hypotheses to a description of the language and applications of the language - may be found in "The SOAR Papers" (Rosenbloom et al 1993).

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Daniel Allsopp

Article written March 2001

AN ANALYSIS OF BRITISH JOURNAL OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY 1991

Since the 1960s, there has been a growing awareness that any experiment's generalisability and validity depends upon the participants used. Sears (1986) analysed the articles in the major journals of social psychology in 1980 and 1985. Around 83% of the studies used students as their sample, despite the desire to generalise the findings.

Students are a minority group and make up less than 5% of the population. Thus the use of students in such situations produces sampling and participant bias into the research.

Sears (1986) notes how students vary from the general population:

- their self concept may not be fully formed;
- their social and political attitudes may be less crystallised;
- they may be more egocentric;
- they may have a stronger need for peer approval;
- they may have unstable peer relationships.

Also their intelligence is higher than the average.

Despite these criticisms, many studies are based on student samples (because of the convenience). Taking the "British Journal of Social Psychology" 1991, which produced 4 issues with 26 articles. 73% of the participants used were students (see table 1). Table 2 gives a breakdown of age of the students.

Another issue for researchers, which has its origins in the 1960s, is that of the ethics of research with humans. One way to address the issue of informed consent and the right to non-participation is to use volunteers.

However, individuals who volunteer are not necessarily typical of the general population. Ora (1965) suggests that volunteers are more likely to obey "demand characteristics" because, among other factors, they perceive volunteering as a socially desirable act, and are more likely to seek social approval.

In the "British Journal of Social Psychology" 1991, 8 of 13 studies (where details were given) used volunteers.

TYPE OF PARTICIPANTS

	TOTAL NUMBER	STUDENTS	MALE	FEMALE	NON- STUDENTS
MARCH	832	752	274	478	80
JUNE	921	514	171 unknown	159 184	407
SEPTEMBER	359	226	37 unknown	74 115	133 families
DECEMBER	638	529	320	209	109
TOTALS	2750	2021	802 unknown	920 299	729
	100%	73%			27%
GENDER BREAKDOWN			39% unknown	45% 16%	

Table 1 - Type of participants used in studies based on issue of journal.

AGE OF STUDENTS

	YOUNGER THAN 20YRS	20-35YRS	36YRS+	UNKNOWN	TOTAL
MARCH	208	218	0	406	832
JUNE	80	90	0	751	921
SEPTEMBER	0	131 (including 41)		228 (113 families)	359
DECEMBER	0	337	109 (18-79yrs)	192	638
TOTALS	288	776	(109)	1577	

	10%	30%	3%	57%
AGE KNOWN	27%	73%		1064

Table 2 - Breakdown of age of students used in studies based on issue of journal.

Concerning other ethical issues, Menges (1973) noted how, in six major American psychology journals in 1971, around 90% of the studies used some form of deception.

Three studies in the "British Journal of Social Psychology" could be seen as ethically questionable:

- giving false information about success on a task, in order to manipulate self esteem;
- approaching strangers in the street to fill in a questionnaire while wearing a pro-gay badge or not;
- filming the participants without their knowledge.

Concerning miscellaneous issues, four studies used child samples, three of which were questionnaire research. While table 3 shows the gender differences in the authorship of the articles.

AUTHORS OF ARTICLES

	TOTAL	FEMALE	MALE	UNSURE
MARCH	15	5	5	5
JUNE	19	4	15	0
SEPTEMBER	11	2	5	4
DECEMBER	12	3	7	2
TOTALS	57	14	32	11
	100%	24.5%	56%	19.5%

($\chi^2 = 11.98$; $df = 1$; $p = 0.001$; 2 tailed)

Table 3 - Gender differences in authorship of articles based on issue of journal.

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KEVIN BREWER

Article written 1993

AN ANALYSIS OF BRITISH JOURNAL OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY 1998

Sears (1986) noted the tendency to use students as participants, thereby creating a sampling bias for the generalisation of results. I (in this journal) found a similar bias in the "British Journal of Social Psychology" in 1991 - 73% of participants were students.

This report looks at the participants used in "British Journal of Social Psychology" in 1998. There were 28 articles in four issues, of which six articles were reviews. Of 5142 participants used, 60.1% were students (68.1% when unknown participants removed) (see table 1).

TYPE OF PARTICIPANTS

	TOTAL NUMBER	STUDENTS	NON- STUDENTS	UNKNOWN
MARCH	1702	1153	549	0
JUNE	1394	588	307	499
SEPTEMBER	1014	496	518	0
DECEMBER	1032	852	73	107
TOTALS	5142	3089	1447	606
	100%	60.1%	28.1%	11.8%
OF KNOWN		68.1%	31.9%	

Table 1 - Type of participants used in studies based on issue of journal in 1998.

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